

Jorge Luis Borges

The Form of the Sword

To E. H. M.

His face was crossed with a rancorous scar: a nearly perfect ashen arc which sank into his temple on one side and his cheek on the other. His real name is of no importance: in Tacuarembó everyone knew him as the Englishman of La Colorada. The great landowner of these parts, Cardoso, had not been interested in selling; I have heard that the Englishman had recourse to an unexpected argument: he told him the secret history of the scar. The Englishman had come from the frontier, from Rio Grande del Sur; there were those who said he had been a smuggler in Brazil. His fields were overgrown with underbrush; the wells were bitter; to remedy these faults, the Englishman worked alongside his peones. They say he was strict to the point of cruelty, but scrupulously fair. They also say he was a drinking man: a couple of times a year he would lock himself up in a room in the tower, and two or three days later he would emerge as if from a bout of insanity or from the battlefield, pale, tremulous, abashed-and as authoritarian as ever. I remember his glacial eyes, his energetic thinness, his gray mustache. He had scant dealings with anyone; true, his Spanish was rudimentary, contaminated with Brazilian. Apart from an occasional commercial letter or pamphlet, he received no correspondence.

The last time I made a trip through the Northern provinces a flash flood in the Caraguata arroyo forced me to spend the night at La Colorada. I was only there a few minutes when I felt that my presence was inopportune. I tried getting into the good graces of the Englishman; I resorted to the least acute of all the passions: patriotism. I said that a country with the spirit of England was invincible. My interlocutor agreed, but he added with a smile that he was not English. He was Irish, from Dungarvan. Having said this, he stopped himself, as if he had revealed a secret.

After supper we went out to look at the sky. It had cleared, but behind the ridge of the mountains, the south, fissured and shot through with lightning flashes, was brewing up another storm. Back in the deserted dining room, the waiter who had served us supper brought out a bottle of rum. We drank steadily, in silence.

I do not know what hour of the night it might have been when I realized that I was drunk; I do not know what inspiration or exultation or tedium made me mention the scar. The Englishman's face changed color. For a few seconds I thought he was going to ask me to leave. Finally he said, in a normal voice:

"I'll tell you the story of my wound on one condition: that you do not minimize the opprobrium it calls forth, that you not belittle a single infamous circumstance."

I agreed. And this, then, is the story he recounted, in a mixture of English, Spanish, and Portuguese:

About 1922, in a city in Connaught, I was one of many men conspiring for Irish independence. Of my comrades, some survived to engage in

peaceful pursuits; others, paradoxically, fight in the desert and at sea under the English colors; another, the man of greatest worth, died in the courtyard of a barracks, at dawn, before a firing squad of soldiers drowsy with sleep; still others (not the most unfortunate ones), met their fate in the anonymous and nearly secret battles of the civil war. We were Republicans, Catholics; we were, I suspect, romantics. For us Ireland was not only the utopian future and the intolerable present; it was a bitter and loving mythology, it was the circular towers and the red bogs, it was the repudiation of Parnell and the enormous epics which sing of the theft of bulls who in a former incarnation were heroes and in others were fish and mountains . . . On one evening I shall never forget, we were joined by a comrade from Munster: a certain John Vincent Moon.

He was scarcely twenty years old. He was thin and soft at the same time. He gave one the uncomfortable impression of being invertebrate. He had studied, with fervor and vanity, every page of some communist manual or other; dialectic materialism served him as a means to end any and all discussion. The reasons that one man may have to abominate another, or love him, are infinite: Moon reduced universal history to a sordid economic conflict. He asserted that the revolution is predestined to triumph. I told him that only lost causes can interest a gentleman . . . By then it was nighttime. We continued our disagreements along the corridor, down the stairs, into the vague streets. The judgments emitted by Moon impressed me less than their unattractive and apodictic tone. The new comrade did not argue: he passed judgment with obvious disdain and a certain fury.

As we came to the outlying houses, a sudden exchange of gunfire caught us by surprise. (Just before or after, we skirted the blank wall of a factory or barracks.) We took refuge along a dirt road; a soldier, looming gigantic in the glare, rushed out of a burning cabin. He shrieked at us and ordered us to halt. I pressed on; my comrade did not follow me. I turned back: John Vincent Moon was frozen in his tracks, fascinated and eternalized, as it were, by terror. I rushed to his side, brought down the soldier with a single blow, shook and pounded Vincent Moon, berated him, and ordered him to follow me. I was forced to yank him by his arm; a passionate fear paralyzed him. We fled through a night suddenly shot through with blazes. A burst of rifle fire sought us out; a bullet grazed Moon's right shoulder; while we ran among the pines, he broke into feeble sobbing.

During that autumn of 1922 I had taken refuge in a country house belonging to General Berkeley. This officer (whom I had never seen) was carrying out some administrative assignment in Bengal. His house, though it was less than a hundred years old, was dark and deteriorated and abounded in perplexing corridors and vain antechambers. A museum and an enormous library usurped the ground floor: controversial and incompatible books which, somehow, make up the history of the nineteenth century; scimitars from Nishapur, in whose arrested circular arcs the wind and violence of battle seemed to last. We entered (I seem to remember) through the back part of the house. Moon, his lips dry and quivering, muttered that the events of the evening had been very interesting. I dressed his wound, and brought him a cup of tea. (His "wound," I saw, was superficial.) Suddenly he stammered perplexedly:

"But you took a considerable chance."

I told him not to worry. (The routine of the civil war had impelled me to act as I had acted. Besides, the capture of a single one of our men could have compromised our cause.)

The following day Moon had recovered his aplomb. He accepted a cigarette, and severely cross-questioned me concerning "the economic resources of our revolutionary party." His questions were quite lucid. I told him (in all truth) that the situation was serious. Shattering volleys of rifle fire reverberated in the south. I told Moon that our comrades expected us. My trench coat and revolver were in my room; when I returned, I found Moon stretched on the sofa, his eyes shut. He thought he had fever; he spoke of a painful shoulder spasm.

I realized then that his cowardice was irreparable. I awkwardly urged him to take care of himself and took my leave. I blushed for this fearful man, as if I, and not Vincent Moon, were the coward. What one man does is something done, in some measure, by all men. For that reason a disobedience committed in a garden contaminates the human race; for that reason it is not unjust that the crucifixion of a single Jew suffices to save it. Perhaps Schopenhauer is right: I am all others, any man is all men, Shakespeare is in some way the wretched John Vincent Moon.

We spent nine days in the enormous house of the General. Of the agony and splendor of the battle I shall say nothing: my intention is to tell the story of this scar which affronts me. In my memory, those nine days form a single day; except for the next to the last, when our men rushed a barracks and we were able to avenge, man for man, the sixteen comrades who had been machine-gunned at Elphin. I would slip out of the house toward dawn, in the confusion of the morning twilight. I was back by dusk. My companion would be waiting for me upstairs: his wound did not allow him to come down to meet me. I can see him with some book of strategy in his hand: F. N. Maude or Clausewitz. "The artillery is my preferred arm," he conceded one night. He would inquire into our plans; he liked to censure or revamp them. He was also in the habit of denouncing our "deplorable economic base." Dogmatic and somber, he would prophesy a ruinous end. C'est une affaire flambee, he would murmur. In order to show that his being a physical coward made no difference to him, he increased his intellectual arrogance. Thus, for better or for worse, passed nine days.

On the tenth, the city definitively fell into the hands of the Black and Tans. Tall silent horsemen patrolled the streets. The wind was filled with ashes and smoke. At an intersection in the middle of a square, I saw a corpse - less tenacious in my memory than a manikin - upon which some soldiers interminably practiced their marksmanship . . . I had left my quarters as the sunrise hung in the sky. I returned before midday. In the library, Moon was talking to someone; by his tone of voice I realized that he was using the telephone. Then I heard my name; then that I would return at seven; then the suggestion that I be arrested as I crossed the garden. My reasonable friend was selling me reasonably. I heard him requesting certain guarantees of personal security.

At this point my story becomes confused, its thread is lost. I know I pursued the informer down the dark corridors of nightmare and the deep

stairs of vertigo. Moon had come to know the house very well, much better than I. Once or twice I lost him. I cornered him before the soldiers arrested me. From one of the general's mounted sets of arms I snatched down a cutlass; with the steel half-moon I sealed his face, forever, with a half-moon of blood. Borges, I have confessed this to you, a stranger. Your contempt will not wound me as much.

Here the narrator stopped. I noticed that his hands were trembling.

"And Moon?" I asked him.

"He was paid the Judas-money, and fled to Brazil. And that afternoon, he watched some drunks in an impromptu firing squad in the town square shoot down a manikin."

I waited in vain, for him to go on with his story. At length I asked him to continue.

A sob shook his body. And then, with feeble sweetness, he pointed to the white arced scar.

"You don't believe me?" he stammered. "Don't you see the mark of infamy written on my face? I told you the story the way I did so that you would hear it to the end. I informed on the man who took me in: I am Vincent Moon. Despise me."